

Sermon preached by the Rev. Gabi Weinreich

## PROPER 8 (YEAR B)

July 2, 2006  
Saint Clare's, Ann Arbor

2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27  
2 Corinthians 8:7-15

### *How are the mighty fallen!*

I stated my text not in the way it was read to us but in the more poetic King James Version, in which form it has entered the English language sufficiently to be listed in Bartlett's Familiar Quotations. The reason is clear: almost every day the news brings us another item to which the saying can be applied. From a President of the United States who seemingly could do no wrong yet whose rankings have now plummeted into the deepest ditch; to two captains of commerce who only yesterday blithely assumed that it is perfectly OK to add millions to their billions at the cost of the retirement savings of thousands of employees but are now being marched off to prison: How are the mighty fallen, indeed!

Yet my interest today is not in these, what one might call *political* examples of that saying, but rather in its *economic* meaning, in which the "fallen" are not those who have lost their *power* but those who have, like those poor Enron employees, lost their *subsistence*. Put simply, my subject this morning concerns *the poor*.

Let me begin by recounting an incident that happened many years ago. As a friend of mine and I were one day crossing the then majestic expanse of Pennsylvania Station in New York City, a miserable-looking beggar approached us pleading for a handout and saying that he had eight young children to feed at home; whereupon I reached into my pocket, came out with a quarter (perhaps the equivalent of two and a half dollars today), and handed it to him. The encounter over, my friend turned to me and asked: "How can you be so sure he actually does have eight children? Conversely, if he does, is one quarter enough?" I was taken aback; neither question had actually occurred to me but both were, I had to admit, well taken. I'm not sure how I responded at the time except to shrug my shoulders; but in the intervening years I have come up with some answers, admittedly partial though they be, which I would like to share with you this morning.

Partial answer number one: Do the poor need to pass a qualifying test before they merit help? Contrary to the universal usage of public welfare agencies, and contrary also

to what are often our own inclinations, the Bible consistently says “No.” “You shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him ...” we read in the book of Deuteronomy [Deuteronomy 15:8-9]. No question is raised here, or anywhere else in Biblical legislation that I know of, about how he *came to be poor*. Was he previously a hard-working man imbued with middle-class values who encountered some bad luck through no fault of his own, and thus belongs to what the Victorians called “the deserving poor”? Or — to take the other extreme — is he a drunkard and a drug addict who abuses his wife, neglects his children, and throws everything away just to feed his habits? The Bible puts them in the same category with regard to our duty to help. Naturally, *the way in which best to help* someone does depend on the situation, and what is doing a favor to one can be doing a disfavor to another; in fact, people of good will can, and often do, disagree about the best path that ought to be taken. There is nothing in the Bible that denies this, or that frees us of the duty to be responsive in an intelligent and truly helpful way. Under no circumstances, however, are we allowed to say to a poor person, “Sorry, you had your chance and you blew it, so now tough on you.”

I am reminded of something that took place back in 1982, during the initial weeks of the Saint Andrew’s Breakfast Program — a program which is still going today, and of which, long before I was ordained, I had the honor of being the first coordinator. Among the many Ann Arbor firms that responded with open hearts to our appeal for food donations was the Croissant Shop, which daily gave us their unsold stock, so that our guests (which is how we invariably referred to them) could have croissants with their morning coffee. Before long — wouldn’t you know it? — an irate letter was published in *The Ann Arbor News* complaining that it is inappropriate for poor people on the dole to be fed that kind of luxury food. But some days later there appeared in the same paper a response from the proprietor of the Croissant Shop. In mock apology, he explained that if he knew how to make watery gruel he would be glad to do it; but unfortunately his skill, and his business, is making croissants, so that’s all that he has to contribute. (In my own name I will add that today, a quarter of a century later, the croissants from the Croissant Shop are still far and away the best in Ann Arbor.)

Partial answer number two: Do we need to *trust* a poor person before we decide to help? Again, the Biblical answer is “No.” Continuing the same words of Moses, “... you shall open your hand to him, and *lend* him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be.” Now it is perfectly clear that, in context, such a loan can hardly be thought of as a secure investment. Once again, I am reminded of an experience early in my ministry, when a person whom I didn’t know came to me with a hard-luck story that, as a matter of fact, I think was perfectly true: she was two months behind in her rent and about to be evicted from her apartment, but she had a plan for getting herself back on her feet if only those two months back rent could be paid up. She assured me that what she was requesting would be only a loan, which in four months she would have no problem repaying. “You know what?” I said, “I will pay one month’s rent for you out of my discretionary fund, and I will lend you the payment for the second month out of my own money. You don’t need to repay the first; but I do expect you to repay the second.” My idea, of course, was to encourage her to keep her promise by making that promise more realistic. But guess

what? I never saw her again, which, alas, did not much surprise me; yet it seems to me that I acted correctly in terms of the Bible's injunctions.

Partial answer number three: How do we decide how much to give? A quarter? A dollar? A thousand dollars? Ah, there's the rub! Moses says "sufficient for his need," but that is not much help: after all, I had no idea whether that beggar in Pennsylvania Station really did have eight children, or six, or none at all, so the exact "need" is not always easy to ascertain.

We are tempted to turn to Saint Paul, who in the passage from Second Corinthians that we heard this morning appears to be delivering his stewardship sermon. In doing so, he reminds us of "the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. [But]," he continues with obvious inconsistency, "I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you." Excuse me? You didn't mean that we should feel "pressure"? Then why did you just remind us that Christ, in order for us to become rich, not merely felt "pressure" — a rather mild word — *but was crucified*? Then, if my task is to imitate Christ, does it not follow that when that beggar approached me in Pennsylvania Station I should, indeed, have given up all I had, including not only my shirt but my life?

So here Saint Paul is not much help either, and neither is the frequently heard suggestion that the answer to our problem is in tithing. Much as I respect people who tithe, the truth is that Biblical legislation on this subject belongs to a completely different context, the context of supporting a professional clergy rather than simply those in need. No, it seems that how much to give to the poor simply cannot be decided by any preset formula, but is something with which each of us needs to wrestle and the responsibility for which each of us needs to assume. I believe that this is what both Moses and Jesus had in mind in giving us that other often-quoted saying — that the poor will always be with us: *the moral question of how to deal with the poor can never be reduced to a simple rule*. And that, we might say, is the bad news.

On the other hand, isn't it only little children who are forever demanding simple rules? Isn't it only little children that cannot distinguish the precepts that govern profound ethical principles from those that concern where to put away the silverware? And wasn't it only when Adam and Eve still dwelt in what a friend of mine once called "the Kindergarten of Eden" that they subsisted on simple up-or-down regulations such as which fruit of which trees it is legal to eat?

That, in fact, is precisely what those two are worrying about when we first meet them in the garden, where I personally am inclined to believe they took those dietary proscriptions much more seriously than God himself did. According to the Book of Genesis, this made God so terribly angry that he expelled them from Paradise, an event to which theologians have given the title "The Fall of Man." But are the mighty truly fallen? Or did they just grow up?

All that we really know from the Bible's narrative — since the only witnesses were those two adolescents themselves — is that something terribly scary began to stir inside them, so scary that they perceived it as nothing less than an evil serpent slithering its way through the tree branches personifying what they thought were their own evil

intentions. All of us remember well the sheer terror that can accompany that youthful transition; imagine, therefore, how much worse it would be if you and another adolescent were the only two human beings in the universe, without friends, mentors or sympathetic parents (let alone a supportive J2A group) to provide guidance! By contrast, many of us will, like me, recall the exhilaration we felt the first time when, in answer to a question of how to act in a particular situation, our parents responded with “use your judgment,” thus acknowledging that within us we have the capability to generate that judgment.

That’s why I am a little suspicious of the Bible’s account of what exactly happened in that Garden. The directive under no circumstances to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge, that same fruit that would teach Adam and Eve the discernment of good and evil, is just not consistent with my idea of God as the perfect parent; nor is the purported “punishment” of having to work for a living, which to adults is an acceptable — and often very gratifying — component of adult life. It is, however, all too consistent with how it might seem to a young boy or girl just entering the journey to adulthood.

“You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life” [John 5:39] says Jesus mockingly to those who oppose him. Much as we sometimes wish it were so, the Bible is not a rulebook for playing the game of life, since there is no *game of life*, only plain old life, to deal with. Nowhere does the Bible tell us that “God created the world as a giant chessboard, and told people the laws by which to play,” or that “God created the world as a enormous ball field, and taught human beings the rules of the game.” Rather, “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them” [Genesis 1:27]; and “the Lord God formed man from the dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the spirit of life” [Genesis 2:7]. It was that divine image, that living spirit, through which our sense of morality was given to us. At that moment Adam and Eve had to begin to live, not by *externally imposed* rules, but by the adult decision-making process which draws its guidance from *internally generated* criteria, learning to identify what is right not by what some authority figure tells us but on what is judged to be right by the image of God that was implanted in us at Creation.

That, then, is the good news: living in a world in which there are difficult moral decisions to be made, far from being God’s curse, is instead his great and generous blessing; and having the capacity to make those decisions — also known as having a conscience — is perhaps the greatest gift granted by God to his adult children. Rather than greeting it with fear, or even deploring it as being a result of our sins, we should welcome it with gladness, rejoicing in it as showing that we are beloved children of the most perfect parent of all.